

SUMMARY OF WORKSHOP RE. MARKETING AND TRANSPORT

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The workshop was intended to promote discussion regarding the marketing and transport of sheep, whether exported or otherwise, and to establish a view about the best way forward for marketing, with regard to welfare and disease control, and to try and produce a transport policy for the Society.

The views of the National Sheep Association were given via John Thorley and Jenny Anderson, and the views of the R.S.P.C.A. were given by Dr Julia Wrathall.

The N.S.A. view

Jenny Anderson described sheep as extremely hardy animals, and also described some of the results of Bristol research into the effects of transport on sheep.

The average journey duration is 4.7 hours, although this only relates to the journey away from a market, and most sheep are only transported once in their lifetime, i.e. to slaughter.

Sheep exports increased dramatically between 1986 and 1993, although levels have fallen again since '93.

John Thorley stated that markets are the most suitable means of trading sheep because of the flexibility and freedom available to vendors. It is, he believes, the key to extensive livestock trading, and is crucial for the purpose of price-setting and for the social benefits to farmers. All types of lamb can be sold at a live auction mart, unlike via electronic auctions for example.

The fact that markets are open and that 10 - 20 stops can be made when lambs are sold electronically means that markets have welfare benefits for the animals. Furthermore, welfare is clearly linked to economics, in that the higher price resulting from a live market system benefits all sheep.

Mr Thorley firmly believes that the continuation of the live auction holds the key to the future for the 80,000 sheep farmers in the U.K.

The R.S.P.C.A. view

Ms Wrathall explained how the R.S.P.C.A. tries to influence and encourage good welfare practice, and how livestock welfare has been important to the organisation ever since the R.S.P.C.A. started.

Different results from the Bristol group were described, results which indicated a very prolonged recovery after 9 - 14 hours transport in good conditions.

The R.S.P.C.A. does not believe that long export journeys can be justified on moral grounds simply for the production of meat. She also indicated that British industries such as the British Leather Federation and The National Federation of Meat Traders supported the view that lambs should be exported as carcasses rather than live.

Whilst the R.S.P.C.A. accepts that some transport is necessary, they want to minimise the frequency and adverse effects. They are opposed to live sales because of the amount of bruising and because of the stresses of loading and unloading, although they also accept that the alternatives carry risks as well.

Discussion Groups

The Future of Sheep Markets:

The group firstly endorsed the B.V.A. policy of slaughter as close to the point of production as possible, and also considered that the likelihood of there being more abattoirs, mobile or otherwise was not realistic. The fact that the number of markets is declining is a problem because of the increased numbers of stops and pick-ups required. This stresses sheep already on the transporter.

It was believed that there are few problems at the best markets, and that the other markets, of poorer standards ought to be encouraged to improve, possibly through the use of league tables, but it was not specified how these might work.

Governments of all persuasions should be lobbied regarding animal welfare, according to this discussion group.

It was commented that the transport regulations ought to be better enforced, but that since 99 per cent of the life of a sheep is on-farm, welfare was of more importance there. Furthermore, it was emphasised that if the consumer really wants good, safe and welfare friendly food, they must pay for it.

The Science of Transport

Transport is necessary for sheep farming, but only fit healthy sheep should be transported. There was some concern expressed about the transport of old ewes that might be in poor condition, and/or have chronic disease.

This group also supported the B.V.A. policy (of slaughter as close to the point of production as possible) as an ideal, but commented that loading and unloading are the main causes of stress, the length of the journey being a relatively peripheral issue. The use of hydraulic lifts for loading and unloading sheep is to be encouraged, and lorry standards ought to be raised generally, although no specific suggestions were made.

It was thought that the 1 hour break was an unnecessary stress on sheep.

No comment was made regarding whether the quality of a journey was more important than the distance.

The most problematical area was that of stocking density on a lorry. All research indicates that sheep lie down after 3 - 4 hours on a lorry if they are given the opportunity. The idea that sheep must be given room to do this is an anathema to the sheep industry, but recent evidence indicates that fatigue occurs at above certain stocking densities on longer journeys. [Author's note: Perhaps the stocking rate could be incorporated in the information on the Animal Transport Certificate that is required for journeys over 50km, or on the Journey Plan for journeys over 8 hours. Also, the industry, which is opposed to space for lying down, needs to explain how non-athletic animals such as sheep can be expected to stand for journeys of up to 16 hours without getting tired, as research indicates that they do not lean on each other in order to rest.]

The practical problem is how to ascribe a stocking density given all the variables of sheep breeds, fleece length, weights and ages etc. The formula of square metres per 100 kilos was felt to be unworkable, and a need for some calculated tables or other system was seen.

Overall, the transport of sheep was not seen as a the most important welfare issue in sheep farming.

Commerce versus Welfare.

Once again transport was seen as being of lesser importance for sheep welfare compared to other issues such as obstetrics and lameness.

Export certificates were not thought to be a problem as long as a veterinary surgeon acted with integrity.

Several questions were left unanswered within this group:

1. Are we putting farming interests before welfare if we support live exports?
2. Is what is good for the farming industry good for the individual sheep?
3. If there is good evidence of welfare abuses either on export journeys, or at foreign abattoirs, are we entitled to wash our hands of these when certifying exports?

These are all questions that the Society could be asked, to which we should have answers.

Summary

- Sheep have to be transported during their life.
- The transport of sheep is not the most important welfare issue in sheep farming.
- The Society supports the principle of slaughter as close to the point of production as possible.
- Old sheep are likely to be more susceptible than lambs to poor welfare during transport.
- There is a need to improve some markets, and some transport vehicles.
- Stocking density on lorries presents serious practical difficulties, but it is believed space for lying down, at least for longer journeys, is required for good welfare.
- There are still some ethical questions that need to be answered by the Society.